

## Corporeal Schema, Body Techniques, Habitus

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### Corporeal Schema

Descartes portrayed the body as a mere mechanical object, external to the life of his real self; that is, his mind. The mind knows, perceives and understands. It does all of things definitive of human beings. The body is mere ‘meat’, to be known and used. Merleau-Ponty disagrees with this. We come to know the world in embodied ways, for Merleau-Ponty, and we have many forms of knowledge and understanding which are entirely bodily: i.e. abilities: e.g.

- ! I know how to type. I know where the different letters are on the keyboard, so that I can type quickly without always having to search for them. But this is not reflective knowledge. I couldn’t tell you where the letters are. ‘Knowing’, in this sense, means that my fingers are able to do it.
- ! I know how to drive. As I drive I am constantly manipulating the controls with my hands and feet but I do so without thinking, *and if I do start to think about things go wrong – I lose my automatic power to drive and, of course, I take my mind off the road.*
- ! I know how to play squash. I charge around the court, always sticking to the rules but always playing strategically; not just returning balls but placing them in ways which might catch my partner out. But I have no time to think about it. Indeed, I only play good squash if I merge with the game and let my body do the thinking.
- ! I know how to speak, ‘listen’, read and write. As a child it took me many years to acquire these skills, and now, as I am learning French, I must

start learning again, struggling to make the right sounds and work out what they mean. There is quite obviously a ‘technique’ to be ‘understood’. In English, however, it all comes so naturally to me that I’ve no idea how I do it.

All of this presupposes also that I ‘know’ my body – know where all of its parts are at various times, relative to each other and to the external environment; know how to move them etc. This is not reflective knowledge either, however. Again I don’t know that I know it, and might only realise this at times when things go wrong. Iris Young, for example, has noted how a women’s body can change more quickly than this bodily sense of self, or ‘corporeal schema’, during pregnancy, with the effect that women find themselves trying to do things that they could do before pregnancy but which they can’t during it. They misjudge their own size, for example, when moving in and out of spaces. They misjudge the amount of effort required to launch themselves into certain types of activity, now that they are bigger. And they misjudge such things as their centre of balance.

This tacit and embodied sense of self, or corporeal schema, is modified through the incorporation of certain sorts of technology. If you wear a tall hat when you’re not used to doing so, for example, you often fail to duck appropriately as you pass under arches. People who often wear hats, by contrast, may duck unnecessarily even when they are not wearing one, because the dimensions of the hat have become a part of their corporeal schema. Similarly, learning to drive a car involves incorporating the dimensions of the car within one’s corporeal schema (its size, for parking, its acceleration potential, for pulling away at a roundabout). This is illustrated when we swap cars and find our expectations confounded: e.g. we try to get through a gap which we won’t fit into, or we pull onto a roundabout but the car doesn’t go fast enough to do so as we expected.

The corporeal schema is modified by habit. Habit is crucial for Merleau-Ponty, We don’t have instincts, like other animals, he argues. But ‘useful’ ways of acting can take root for us, in the form of habit. Culture, in this sense, is our nature:

Although our body does not impose definite instincts upon us, as it does other animals, it does at least give to our life the form of generality, and develops our personal acts into stable dispositional tendencies. In this sense our nature is not long-established custom, since custom presupposes the form of passivity derived from nature. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146)

Arguing against behaviourist conceptions of habits, as mere mechanical, stimulus-response pathways, however, Merleau-Ponty insists that habit is a form of understanding and knowledge:

We say that the body has understood and habit has been cultivated when it has absorbed a new meaning and assimilated a fresh core of significance. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 146)

Integral to this conception is the fact that habits admit of a great deal of improvisation, as the example of the skilled game player illustrates. To have acquired the ‘habit’ of language is not to say the same thing all of the time. Moreover, habits are ‘transferable’ in at least two respects. Firstly, we can transfer skills acquired in one ‘region’ of the body to another, as when we write in the sand with our feet, turn on a light switch with our forehead or untie a knot with our teeth. They are not, in other words, localised in specific body parts. Secondly, we can, by way of a practical analogy, treat unfamiliar situations as if they were of a familiar type and apply our usual solutions to the problems they pose.

Merleau-Ponty is equally clear, however, that he does not intend these notions to be understood in an ‘intellectualist’ fashion, where they would be associated with the supposedly self-transparent activities of a reflexive, epistemological subject. Knowledge and understanding, as Merleau-Ponty understands them, are capacities for acting; know-how belonging to an agent whose primary relation to their environment, as we discussed in chapter five, is that of active, pre-reflective and practical involvement. Moreover, the principles and meanings to which Merleau-Ponty refers are ‘incarnate’, ‘motor’ principles and meanings, whose full sense is only ever expressed in the actions to which they belong:

If habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action what then is it? It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort. The subject knows where the letters are on the typewriter as we know where one of our limbs is, through knowledge bred of familiarity which does not give us a position in objective space. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 144)

We said earlier that it is the body which understands in the acquisition of habit. This way of putting it will appear absurd, if understanding is subsuming a sense datum under an idea, and if

the body if as an object. But the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of ‘understand’ and our notion of the body. To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance –and the body is our anchorage in a world. (*ibid.*)

This anti-intellectualist point is reinforced by a consideration of the nature of learning. We learn, Merleau-Ponty argues, not by thinking about things but by doing them. Learning is incorporation, an absorption of new competencies and understandings into the corporeal schema which, in turn, transform one’s way of perceiving and acting in the world. This is obvious in the case of certain sorts of activities; one does not learn how to dance or play the guitar by reading, but rather by dancing and playing. Even if a reading element is present in such learning activities it must be translated into practice to become significant. Much the same is true of even the most ‘intellectual’ activities such as science and philosophy, however, as many philosophers of science now suggest. Intellectual activity is still ‘activity’ and always presupposes a competence in particular ways of reading, reasoning and responding; a competence at specific language games which is acquired by playing those games and incorporating their principles, as habits, within one’s corporeal schema.

### **Throwing Like a Girl**

Iris Young has criticised Merleau-Ponty because, she argues, he assumes that all people enjoy this same ‘ease’ with respect to their bodies. This is not so, she argues, for women. The bodies of women, she argues, are subject to objectification, ogling and interference of various sorts, which makes women more consciously aware of their bodies, therefore disturbing the pore-reflective harmony described by Merleau-Ponty – as we have already said, becoming aware of our bodies, thinking about them, renders their movement awkward. In addition, she notes, the institutions of femininity, added to the defensive way in which women must often move, makes their manner of comportment different to that of men, in a way which disadvantages them. Her example of this is ‘throwing like a girl’. Amongst other things this involves:

- ! Adopting a reactive rather than a proactive strategy in dealing with many types of objects. A woman who is catching a ball, she argues, will typically wait for the ball to ‘hit’ her, where a man will move to meet it.
- ! Only using one part of her body, in isolation, rather than the whole: e.g. lifting an object only using her arms, rather than (as men do) bending her

legs and back, so as to swing the whole power of the body into the lift.

The female version, Young notes, makes its practitioners less able to lift heavy weights.

The reason why women move in this way, to reiterate, is a) because it would be ‘unladylike’, and contrary to everything they have learned, and b) it would open up their body to visible inspection and possible interference.

### **Mauss and Body Techniques**

To take this point further we can consider the work of Marcel Mauss (Durkheim’s nephew no less!). Mauss, an anthropologist as well as a sociologist, noted considerable differences in the ways in which different social groups (both within and across societies) ‘use’ their bodies. Just as there are different languages and regional accents, he noted, so too there are different ways of walking, running, swimming, sleeping, eating, having sex etc. Furthermore, not only do societies and groups vary in the way they do these things, but some societies have some techniques (e.g. spitting), which other groups and societies don’t have: Mauss mentions an African society whose members did not know how to spit until he taught them but we can think of Leonardo DiCaprio teaching Kate Winslet to spit in *Titanic*. He used the concept of ‘body techniques’ to make sense of this, and the related notion of ‘habitus’:

Please note that I use the Latin word –it should be understood in France- *habitus*. The word translates infinitely better than ‘*habitude*’ (habit or custom), the ‘*exis*’, the ‘acquired ability’ and ‘faculty’ of Aristotle (who was a psychologist). It does not designate those metaphysical *habitudes*, that mysterious ‘memory’, the subject of volumes or short and famous theses. These ‘habits’ do not vary just with individuals and their imitations; they vary between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges. In them we should see the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason rather than, in the ordinary way, merely the soul and its repetitive faculties. (Mauss 1979, 101)

There are two crucial points to draw out of this passage. First, the notion that body techniques manifest a practical reason and are not just mechanical

repetitions. In this respect Mauss mirrors Merleau-Ponty's account of habit. Secondly, the notion that techniques are not merely individual but collective. In effect they constitute a collective pre-representational form of social-mental life. On one hand this complements Durkheim's concept of 'collective representations'. Just as societies and social groups have shared representations of the world, so too they have pre-representational understandings, or body techniques. On the other hand, this also conforms to Durkheim's concept of 'social facts'. Although body techniques only exist insofar as people do them, nevertheless they predate individual agents, will outlive individual agents, have a logic which is irreducible to individual agents, and –though I think Mauss overstates the case- they constrain the individual.

### **Goffman**

Goffman helps us to begin to put these ideas into practice in his studies of the 'doing' of everyday life. Everyday life, he argues, depends upon us doing, and able to use a wide range of techniques which we scarcely notice, but which we have had to learn:

To walk, to cross a road, to utter a complete sentence, to wear long pants, to tie one's shoes, to add a column of figures – all these routines that allow the individual unthinking, competent performance were attained through an acquisition process whose early stages were negotiated in cold sweat. (Goffman 1972, 293)

Furthermore, Goffman adds that we must learn to do these things in a way which negotiates both the social and the physical environment in which we find ourselves. These are not just actions but forms of social interaction. And the body plays a crucial role in these interactions, constantly both signaling to others and reading the signals of others. This is essential for coordination, of course, we must signal 'you go this way and I'll go that' to avoid collision with others, and we often do so by way of movements of our body (a 'body gloss'). It is also essential, however, to the maintenance of order (e.g. when we apologise with a look or a hand gesture), and to our maintenance of 'normal appearances' and a coherent sense of self (e.g. Goffman notes that individuals who 'about face' in the middle of the street often do some form of exaggerated gesture, such as slapping their own leg or audibly

reprimanding themselves, just so that others know that they are not walking aimlessly up and down the street).

### Bourdieu

Bourdieu has perhaps done most with the ideas of ‘bodily hexis’ and ‘habitus’. We will look at his work at a number of points in the course. We will begin, however, with a consideration of hexis and habitus.

The body is shaped by society in many ways, Bourdieu argues. A brief historical reflection upon life expectancy reveals contemporary bodies last much longer than bodies did in the past, for example:

This is, of course, an effect of people’s access to nutrition, their housing conditions, the conditions in which they worked. Furthermore, these conditions, which vary (e.g. across classes within societies) also shape the body in less drastic ways: height, weight, susceptibility to illness. On top of this, Bourdieu notes, people express their social position by way of their ‘bodily hexis’. His main examples of this relate to class and gender. The ways in which people move, speak, stand, sit etc. all reflect their social position according to Bourdieu, and their relationship to the social hierarchy. Members of the aristocracy, for example, talk, walk, stand and sit in an ‘aristocratic way’. And, as Shaw’s *Pygmalion* illustrates, the same is true of working class speech and comportment:

LIZA [*almost in tears*] But I’m sayin it. Ahyee, Buyee, Cu-yee –

HIGGINS. Stop. Say a cup of tea.

LIZA. A capputu-ee.

HIGGINS. Put your tongue forward until it squeezes against the top of your lower teeth. Now  
say cup.

LIZA. C-c-c – I can’t. C-Cup.

PICKERING. Good. Splendid Miss Doolittle.

HIGGINS. By Jupiter, she’s done it at the first shot.

(Shaw 1957: 50)

Language is a body technique, and specifically linguistic, especially phonetic, competence is a dimension of bodily hexis in which one's whole relation to the social world, and one's wholly social informed relation to the world, are expressed. [...] The most frequent articulatory position is an element in an overall way of using the mouth (in talking but also in eating, drinking, laughing etc.) [...] in the case of the lower classes, articulatory style is quite clearly part of a relation to the body that is dominated by the refusal of 'airs and graces' [...] Bourgeois dispositions [esp. petit bourgeois] convey in their physical postures of tension and exertion ... the bodily indices of quite general dispositions towards the world and other people, such as haughtiness and disdain. (Bourdieu 1992, 86-87)

Similarly, women 'throw like girls' and men 'walk like men':

The manly man, who goes straight to his target, without detours, is also a man who refuses twisted and devious looks, words, gestures and blows. He stands up straight and looks straight into the face of the person he approaches or wishes to welcome. (Bourdieu 1992a: 70)

And eat like men:

...fish has to be eaten in a way which totally contradicts the masculine way of eating, that is, with restraint, in small mouthfuls, chewed gently, with the front of the mouth, on the tips of the teeth (because of the bones). The whole masculine identity –what is called virility- is involved in these two ways of eating, nibbling and picking, as befits a woman, or with wholehearted male gulps and mouthfuls, just as it is involved in the two (perfectly homologous) ways of talking, with the front of the mouth or the whole of the mouth ..(Bourdieu 1984, 190)

These differences are important for Bourdieu because, he argues, they articulate with a 'political mythology' and thereby naturalise social

differences and inequalities. Social differences, because inscribed in the body, seem to be rooted in nature.